

# HOUSING PROJECT BRINGS NEW LIFE TO WORKERS

## The Amalgamated's Cooperative Project in Three Years Has Raised Standards in the Community.

By ROSE C. FELD.

IN December, 1927, an experiment in housing was inaugurated by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. On land facing Van Cortlandt Park it financed and erected a group of cooperative apartments intended for wage earners and salaried workers whose incomes ranged between \$2,000 and \$2,500 a year, people who in many instances were living, for want of better quarters, in old-law tenements on the lower east side.

The venture, now three years old, has proved so successful that it has inspired similar developments in other sections of the city. Apart from its financial stability and integrity, its importance lies along human lines. Psychologists, sociologists, housing experts and educators will undoubtedly point it out in the future as an example of the effect of environment on individuals. Three years is a short time in which to note results, but already those who fostered this experiment have tangible and definite betterments to show.

More than 500 families live in this community. Roughly speaking, it has a population of 2,500, that of a small-size American town. Bethel, Conn., has little more; Ludlow, Vt., where Calvin Coolidge went to school, perhaps not as much. Both of these towns are distinctly American, each counting among its residents people whose forebears came over in early Colonial days. The members of the group living in the Amalgamated Dwellings are Americans of more recent vintage; most of them are first-generation citizens who have come from Central European countries. Instead of Plymouth Rock, Ellis Island was the port of their arrival; instead of a background of Colonial life they have memories of the difficulty of fitting into New York's east side.

### Immigrants and Environment.

American life to the immigrant means the life into which his work and his economic status throw him. It is one thing for the farmer who goes to Minnesota and Nebraska; it is another to the needleworker, the carpenter, the painter, the petty tradesman who settles in the slums of New York.

To the passing tourist the slums of New York are an interesting, colorful place of strange languages, strange people, strange smells. They mean streets lined with pushcarts; men with beards and ear-locks; loudly discursive groups; children playing and shouting in streets; baby-carriages and clotheslines and garbage. They mean many things which as a picture are interesting but as environment in which to live and grow are more than a little disheartening. Many fine things exist here, many splendid ideals are nurtured here, many excellent contributions to art and culture have come from here, but not because the environment has fostered them. Rather is one surprised that they have come to the surface in spite of the heavy

weight of sordidness which keeps them down.

Adjustment to conditions is one of the primary laws of existence. The immigrant who takes his place in the factory, in shops and in the streets of New York soon learns how to become a member of the new life that the New World offers. If it means dark rooms, noise, pushcarts, life on the streets, cheap amusements, he accepts it with a patient shrug of his shoulders as being part of the American picture. At first he may rebel but in time he becomes accustomed to it and eventually, even gets to like it. He becomes, according to his belief, an American; he ceases to be an alien among the people with whom he lives. Their work is his work, their activities his, their point of view his point of view, their amusements and recreations his. If he prospers he sometimes moves out of his environment; often he chooses to remain there.

Even for those who get out, the change from one idea of American living to another is a slow and tortuous one. Habits, points of view, attitudes acquired in one milieu cling like burrs to another. Apart from another address the family that moves to Harlem, to the Bronx, to Brooklyn, is little different from the one that originally settled in Rivington Street, in Orchard or in Broome. It is not before the second generation begins to ferment that a change takes place. Its members become the pioneers of a new order demanding new standards and new ideas. There in great measure lies the fundamental cause of misunderstanding between first-generation Americans and second. The tragedy lies with the older group, which believes it has embraced all the new the world can give when it embraced the standards of the slums.

When the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America built their houses facing Van Cortlandt Park and designed them like an English garden community, there were many who were more than skeptical about the results. The question was asked: "Who was going to live there?" The answer was: Men and women engaged in trades of various sorts—tailors, painters, shoemakers, milliners; also clerks, teachers, salespeople. Their immediate background? The east side of New York, in most instances. The houses were put up on a cooperative plan whereby each family, by a series of instalments spread over ten years, would become the owner of its apartment.

Not only was financial failure prophesied for a plan described as a dream of impractical idealists but, what was perhaps worse, ruin of an environmental nature was predicted. The community, it was said, would become a second east side neighborhood. The beautiful shrubbery would have babies' clothes hanging on it; the lawns would be demolished by noisy hoodlums accustomed to street vandalism; the Tudor windows would be disfigured by pillows and bed-clothes hanging out of them, the flowered walks would be littered by

garbage thrown out of windows. In other words, the atmosphere of the slums would travel the subway route up to what was called the Amalgamated "Folly."

Three years is not a long time in which to change human nature. One point of view may have it that human nature has not changed at all but has responded to a different set of conditions. At any rate, to one visiting this settlement it is quite obvious that the fears of those who decried the plan were ill-founded. The Amalgamated Dwellings today, incorporating as they do a sizable community, look no different from any American suburban community of the better sort. Seeing them, one is reminded of glimpses of Pelham, Larchmont or New Rochelle.

The needleworker earning an average of less than \$2,500 a year fits into this picture as comfortably as the more prosperous stock broker fits into the wealthier suburban community. In many ways, the life of the former and his family is fuller and richer than that of the latter. He has his clubs, concerts, his lectures, his cooperative activities; he has a dozen and one things of which he was formerly unaware and which now fill his leisure hours with interest and variety.

The recreations of the tailor or the milliner or the painter and his family living in old-law tenements on the lower east side are not difficult to describe. Looking back, the man in the new environment will talk freely about them. He worked eight hours in the factory, he went home to a meal cooked and often served in a stuffy kitchen; he read his newspapers. Sometimes a neighbor or relative dropped in. If it was warm indoors they went out for a breath of air on the stoop of the house or up on the roof. Sometimes the man went to a lodge meeting; sometimes, when he could afford it, he took his wife to the movies. That was practically all.

### The Wife's Problems.

The life of his wife was no less drab. She shopped, very often from push carts on the street, she gossiped with neighbors, she got her children off to school. The greater part of her life was spent in the kitchen, which as a rule looked out on dark courtyards and clothes lines. Her interests rarely wandered from the immediate needs of her family, the difficulty of making ends meet, the dissatisfaction with an existence that held little but worry, and above all, the problem of her children. Apart from the hours spent in the school-room, her sons and daughters lived most of their waking hours on the street. That was their playground, their social and cultural training field. Their psychological development from infancy to childhood, from childhood to adolescence, from adolescence to maturity, took place in an environment that knew few inhibitions of expression or deed.

### Using Leisure Hours.

That something worth while can be done with hours of leisure has come in the nature of a discovery to many families that have exchanged the dwelling of the past for the one in the community built for wage earners. Not the least important part of the new life which these families are living today is its physical surroundings. First of all there is the park, with its hills and trees and an open sky. The man or woman is rare indeed who does not respond to these surroundings. Instead of push carts and garbage cans and noise there are lawns, flowers, fountains and shrubbery. Peace is here and quiet. The apartments are airy, roomy, bright and on the way to becoming the tenants' own property.

Talk is not confined to news about conditions on the job; it broadens out to take in the activities of men, women and children who are finding a new meaning in family and community life. Men spend their evenings in talk with other men at the various clubs; they go to concerts or lectures in the auditorium, to meetings of tenant owners to discuss the cooperative purchase of food or laundry service, to rehearsals or performances of a drama group. The things to which a man can turn are without number. There is no compulsion about any, but he has the warm satisfaction of knowing that many doors are open to him.

To his wife—the same person who three years ago fretted because her neighbor had the wherewithal to go

to the country for two weeks every Summer—the new environment means even more. There are clubs of every sort making an appeal to women of every sort. There are classes and talks on child education and psychology; there are sewing groups, drama groups, music groups, program committees and playground committees. Being a member of a community has become an adventure.

The problem of bringing up children has lost many of its fears and has taken on the broader lines of constructive development. Whether or not to have a private kindergarten in the building which her child can attend becomes an absorbing topic of interest to the woman who several years ago did not know that private kindergartens existed. The same is true of playgrounds, of music schools, of classes in art and crafts, of libraries.

### Children Benefit.

It has become the fashion among American parents to send their children to camps during the Summer months. Camps cost on an average of \$400 a season. To the wage earner whose income is below the \$2,500 mark, \$400 per child is no mean sum. Yet the children of this development virtually had a camp of their own last year. A plan was worked out whereby all who wished to participate paid \$16 per child for the Summer. Recreation directors, handicraft and woodcraft instructors and a swimming teacher were hired. From the hours of 9 to 6 every day, with time taken out for lunch, the children were living the sort of life, mostly in the woods of Van Cortlandt Park, that children of more prosperous homes were living in the Adirondacks and in Maine.

There is a good deal more to be said about what is going on there but it can be boiled down to a few words. The people have responded to new standards set by a new environment and, what is more, as their outlook and knowledge grows wider their demands upon themselves grow higher. They show it in language, in clothes, in bearing, in content of talk. It has not happened over night—it has not been easy for many to change—but it has happened. There were those at the beginning who found it difficult to shake off old habits of living. Several families who found the new life too restricted at the start moved back to their old haunts but shortly afterward asked to be allowed to return. The new environment and what it meant to them and their children had had a chance to dig in and the old life was no longer possible.